
Theory as art practice: Notes for discipline

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Contemporary art research aims at that point in sensible being where two ostensibly opposed modalities, the visible and the writable, image and text, are or become indiscernible.

An artist may approach this task of research not just from the side of the image, but from that of text.

One form this might take is for an artist to submit a PhD ('practice-based' or '-led') comprised entirely of the written word, which text could count as theory, as practice, or as both, but which in any case would be a specific work of words.

The question, of course, is what that 'word' is.

Not the word after practice but the word as practice, not theory before practice but theory as practice.

Part of what research in visual art is, always is, is to draw out either or both what the art says, and what can be said about the art.

We are interested here in the former, what the art says about itself or seeks to say about itself. And we will call what the art says about itself something written in the work, something textual about what can be seen.

Visual art is not simply visual – there is always something written in the work, something textual, in what is seen, whether or not 'words' are present in the form of legible signs.

And the two, what is seen and what is written in what is seen, need not be in correspondence.

Indeed, necessarily they are disjunctive, and not reducible one to the other.

And it is in the space of that disjunction between what is visible and what is textual about a work that a researcher on art resides (whatever the 'model' or methodology of their PhD).

The disjunction between what is visible and what is textual is the space drawn out in the form of the researcher's writing.

It is a space, an interval, in the work of visual art which is given by how the work itself writes and writes of itself – this would be art writing.

Not simply something sayable about that art in the form of its place or role in and for history, or its meaning for aesthetics or value for criticism – although neither is it simply detached from the discourses of history of art or philosophy of art or art criticism – rather, it is something writerly, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls "a certain writability or scripturality",¹ which makes possible what we see, within what is seen, something which makes the art itself possible as something seeable.

Art writing what it wants to say of itself – this is what the researcher can draw out from the visible.

And an artist writing a PhD may be presenting that writing, the way in which art speaks, how it writes what it wants to say of itself, as his or her practice or as theory, or both.

Visual art is always a negotiation between what is visible and what is textual, and the two, the visible and this writerly something that is textual, need not be materially present in the work for both to be present; neither what is visible nor what is textual need be seen to be present.

If the word can be better made present through making visible its absence then we are speaking here of a presence of what the work wants to say of itself not reducible to the sensed or the felt, or to readable signification.

Artists have always known, with and without knowing, this power of revealing.

And it goes no less further the other way: something which is visible may consist entirely of words.

Art&Language saw this when in the editorial for the first issue of their journal *Art-Language* they entertained the possibility that the editorial itself might count as art.²

When I say they ‘saw’ this I mean it was their insight.

They did not see it in another sense in that they insisted that only words of a certain sort, a certain philosophical formulation of words, is able to count as art, words which present themselves as analytical propositions.

But one could argue that it was what Art&Language saw without seeing that led the way for the likes of Thomas Hirschhorn³ and Benoît Maire⁴ for example to present the kinds of art work they do, works which use theory as just another material.

Works which use words of theory in this way, as material for a visual practice, refuse to acknowledge the theory/practice distinction in *practical* terms, or they do not decide in advance where the distinction falls, and they see their art to be the occasion of working out where it falls or as invitations to the viewer to work out where the distinction falls.

The significance here is as much for *theoretically* understanding the distinction between theory and practice as it is for practically doing so.

The implication being that art practice shows something about art theory that the theory ‘in itself’ is unable to, for example in its more written mode as argumentative word – or rather, that there is no such thing as theory ‘in itself’ which is adequate to itself, not even ‘theoretically’.

The practical and performative use of theory by artists reveals something not just about the theory that theory ‘in itself’ is unable to show, but about the *materiality* of such text.

To use theoretical text as material may have the effect of allowing the artist to assume greater control over the conditions of the presentation and interpretation of their work, even if it constitutes an attempt to loosen or otherwise disrupt the boundaries of art, but it would seem to be always something else as well, a question as to where lies the distinction between theory and practice.

The emergent use of theoretical text as a material constituent of contemporary art practice is another way of questioning the order of dependency between theory and practice.

One research problem arising from this might be: what is it about the materiality of theoretical text which allows this?

If Arthur Danto is right, and we are witnessing a paradigm shift, where philosophy and art theory begin to diverge, it is one which is contrary to his influential ‘end of art’ thesis, which famously claims that the responsibility for answering the question ‘What is art?’ has been handed over by artists to philosophers; instead it is one which leaves the philosophical and

theoretical reflection on art to *artists* – who can no longer be seen simply as practitioners if they refuse to accept the distinction between practice and theory.⁵

It could be argued that theoretical reflection on the use of theory as practice has not kept pace with developments in art practice – there are very few philosophers prepared to philosophise about art contemporary with their practice as philosophers (Danto would be one exception here) – and this lag or hanging back or perhaps even long run-up itself constitutes a space of practice for contemporary artists.

If artists in their practice question the distinction between theory and practice then it is not difficult to see why theoretical reflection on it might in turn become something other than pure theory or simply theory.

Theory is no longer, and it never was, unproblematically outside practice, and once inside it becomes something other than theory.

If theoretical text can be considered practice, in either of the two forms outlined above – namely the PhD as theoretical text submitted as practice, and the use of theoretical text as material for art practice – then research is urgently called for which critically analyses the implications of these for the distinction between theory and practice.

Unless this question is taken seriously debates on the relation of theory to practice will continue to operate on the presumption that theory is not and cannot be practice.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Catalogue', in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, edited and translated by Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 150.

² *Art-Language*, vol 1, no 1, May 1969, p. 1.

³ See for example Hirschhorn's exhibitions *Anschool*, Maastricht: Bonnefantenmuseum, 26 April–11 September 2005, and *Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress*, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 16 September 2005–16 January 2006.

⁴ See Maire's *Spider web* (2006), part of his on-going 'working context' *Elements for a discussion after the end of neon lights in exhibition spaces*.

⁵ Arthur C Danto, 'Approaching the end of art', in *The State of the Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1987), p. 216.